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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how one large, urban school district is successfully building a quality program for educators by combining organizational development, job embedded learning, and collaboration. POET (Professional Organizational Enhancement Training) works to improve learning by enhancing working environments in schools and departments. It emphasizes collaboration between schools and departments to maximize the opportunity for change and create environments districtwide that encourage change. It strives to strengthen collegial relationships and improve interpersonal communications, following a set of strategies for effective adult learning (e.g., adult education should have a climate of respect, have a collaborative mode, foster participation, and foster learning for action). As a first step, the POET team conducts a school needs assessment. The POET model follows the National Staff Development Council's indicators for effective staff development and follows their beliefs (e.g., change creates opportunities for growth, trust is vital for individual and organization development, and diversity strengthens). POET has helped this district build a community within its schools and departments. Formative evaluations show how POET brings a shared sense of vision, increased camaraderie, mutual trust and respect, positive communication, and positive climate. Districtwide, it has helped participants feel good about themselves and learning to collaborate. (SM)

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Professional Organizational Enhancement Program

One Urban Districts' Answer

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What happens when you put Organizational Development, Job Embedded Learning, and Collaboration together in the same room? A large Urban School District is successfully building a quality program for their educators using these qualities. The program is known as the POET program an acronym for Professional Organizational Enhancement Training. The programs goal is to work toward improving learning by enhancing the working environment in schools and departments. The program focuses on the collaboration between schools and departments to maximize the opportunity for change and to create working and learning environments throughout the district where ideas are encouraged and change is endorsed. The programs' objective is to work with schools and departments in strengthening collegial relationships and to improve interpersonal communications.

Collaboration is at the helm of this program. The district worked with the local education association, the state association along with the National Education

Association, together the program was built into what is now a "model" program to support systemic, job embedded, professional development for all of the adults who work with the districts' 45,000 students.

Adult Learning Principles and Practices

The program follows Malcolm Knowles (1998) strategies for effective adult learning, which are:

- ✓ Adult Education programs should have a climate of respect.
- ✓ Adult Education programs should have a collaborative mode.
- ✓ Adult Education programs should help learners achieve self-direction and empowerment.
- ✓ Adult Education programs should capitalize on learners' experiences.
- ✓ Adult Education programs should foster participation.
- ✓ Adult Education programs should foster critical, reflective thinking.
- ✓ Adult Education programs should foster learning for action.
- ✓ Adult Education programs should foster problem posing and problem solving.

Training Components

The program was initiated in1995, 30 teachers and Administrators throughout the district were selected to be trained as trainers. The lead trainer was from the National Education Association. The " train the trainer" model began with adult learning strategies, presentation skills, facilitation skills, decision-making, time management, leadership,

managing change, developing self -esteem, large group intervention techniques, conflict management resolution skills, as well as communication skills.

Since the initiation of the program additional trainers have been trained, along with continuous training opportunities for trainers to learn new skills, and to update their existing skills. The trainers are divided into training teams, and are assigned to schools and departments throughout the school district. The teams' role is to work with a school or department to support and encourage their professional development efforts. In a true reform model, the principal re-examines his or her traditional and positional power normally associated with this role. The principal can really become a powerful role model by relinquishing power to the individuals who work for them and with them. This approach is the essence of team building. The POET Team therefore works with a core group of staff members at the building, this could be the school improvement planning team, the staff development team, or the planning committee, whatever name that it is given, this team of 5 to 10 staff members plans and coordinates efforts between the POET team and the school as a whole. It is this group that coordinates efforts, suggestions, and recommendations from the entire faculty and administration. It is this planning that serves to develop the schools' site based, job embedded, professional development efforts, and program objectives.

The first step in working with a school is for the POET team to conduct a needs assessment. This information could be assessed through surveys, questionnaires, checklists, or individual and group interviews. This data collection provides an avenue to find major interests, concerns and needs. It was important for this district to make sure

that both certified staff and classified staff were represented during the collection of data as well as on the planning team. Shared decision-making was an essential ingredient in this program.

Gathering and analyzing the data in program planning was an important "next" step. The team conducts needs assessments and works with core members of the schools' professional development or school improvement team, together they assess the results of the assessments to determine training needs and to customize professional development activities that would fit the needs of the school. The training opportunities are continuous and ongoing, and the team can be called upon to work with the school staff during curriculum days, inservice time, during staff meeting sessions, or during joint plan time, any time that is convenient for the school. The district's superintendent is so supportive of this program that he has even granted release time for school staffs to work with their POET team. " POET is not a 'top down' type effort, comments the superintendent, "we are going to demonstrate that we can and must all work together as educators to reach a common goal: the academic achievement of our students."

Assessing needs is ongoing, for new needs will continue to surface, objectives will have to be modified, both formative and summative analysis are an important component of the process.

What makes the POET Program unique? It's more than bringing in a guest lecturer, or a consultant for a one shot training session, this model follows the National Staff

Development Councils' indicators for effective staff development, and follows the NSDC beliefs, which are as follows:

NSDC Beliefs (1999)

- Change creates opportunities for growth;
- The primary purpose of staff development is school improvement as measured by success of every student;
- Staff development is fundamental to school improvement;
- All educators share the responsibility for both individual and organizational growth;
- Trust is vital for individual and organization development;
- Individuals and organizations are responsible for defining and achieving and defining standards of excellence;
- Effective staff development is based on theory, research, and proven practice;
- Diversity strengthens;
- Expectations influence accomplishment;
- Example is a powerful teacher;
- Collaboration within the school, community, students, families, community members, and staff is essential for school improvement and accelerated student success;
- Effective staff development honors differences in learners by using various approaches to learning;
- Staff development is responsible for organization development and individual development; and

- Staff development is critical for all those who affect student learning.

Building "Community" within the Schools.

According to Rossi and Stringfield (1995)," 'community' has to do with the deep structure fabric of interpersonal relations. Soundly woven, this fabric permits a shared frame of reference and supports mutual expectations." Building on studies of "community " in school and business settings Rossi and Stringfield identified 10 elements that characterize adult, student, and adult/student relationships in schools that are communities:

- Shared vision;
- Shared sense of purpose;
- Shared values;
- Incorporation of diversity;
- Communication;
- Participation;
- Caring;
- Trust;
- Teamwork;and
- Respect and recognition.

The POET Program has helped this school district build a community within their schools, and departments. This has been a conscience, systemic effort. Rossi and Stringfield believe that "Schools that consciously work at strengthening these elements

are building the necessary foundation for excellence. The relations among adults in schools provide models of behaviors for students. The ways in which teachers, administrators, and classified staff persons relate to students also define the conditions within the teaching and learning of specific subject matters take place. In addition, these relations determine a school's readiness to undertake and sustain efforts to achieve shared goals. The quality of these relationships is critical to all facets of school operation."

Continuous Evaluation

Formative Evaluations from the school districts' schools and departments have heralded the POET program in bringing a shared sense of vision, an increase in comradery, mutual trust and respect, positive communication has been enhanced between staff, students, parents and community, and the program has promoted an overall positive climate.

One Middle School principal wrote:

"Thanks to our POET Team for their outstanding work with our staff for the past two years. The inservices and retreats were very relevant. It was clearly noticed that after each POET session the staff attempted to be better "team players", as they interacted with each other and with our students. Staff carried the team building exercises into their "team meetings" and into their classrooms. There is no doubt in my mind that the POET involvement with our staff had a definite influence in raising our standardized test scores the past two years. We finally have 90 to 95% of our "arrows" going in the same direction, the POET program brought our "awareness" to the foreground!"

The advantages of team-building allows for certified, and classified staff as well as administration to become allies in working towards common vision and goals. Perhaps one of the most significant advantages of team building is the attention placed on student and parental involvement and ultimately student achievement. Team building permits the kind of inclusion that allows each individual to make a contribution to the team effort and more importantly, no one person or group has to carry the project alone. This effort supports a coordinated system of professional development that is data driven, standards based, job embedded, and where collaborative adult learning is taking place. This in turn builds a culture of continuous improvement with the ultimate goal of increased student achievement and school effectiveness.

The POET program is making a noticeable difference throughout the district. The goal of the program is to improve learning by enhancing the working environment in schools and departments. Its all about building relationships, a POET team works with a school staff or department top help improve communication and cooperation. This district has worked to build a permanent, flexible cadre of trainers selected from their own teaching and administrative staff. If you are successful in improving communication and teamwork, even the most difficult combination of people can learn to effectively work together. The district program emphasizes personal strength and sensitivity to others, Poet participants state that they feel good about themselves and learning to collaborate, this sensitivity and cooperation are bound to filter down to the classroom as it helps this district better serve their students, which of course is their ultimate goal.

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